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LOCAL NEWS

Posted Sept. 18, 2004

Wisconsin now owns Fox River locks system

22-year ordeal put to rest with official transfer

By Steve Wideman
Post-Crescent staff writer

APPLETON — Gov. Jim Doyle officially accepted state ownership of the 132-year-old Fox River locks system from the Department of the Army during a ceremony Friday at J restaurant.

The transfer ends a 22-year struggle to keep the locks system from being permanently sealed, but begins a new effort to turn the Fox River between Menasha and Green Bay into a recreation and economic development corridor.

"This is the day we've waited many years for," said Ron Van De Hey, chairman of the Fox River Management Authority, which will oversee restoration and operation of the 17-lock system.

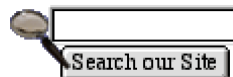
The transfer came after the state Building Commission, meeting at the riverfront restaurant, voted 7-0 to accept ownership of 17 locks and 140 acres of land along 39 miles of the Fox River.

"Today's transfer ensures the locks will be an important part not only of Wisconsin's past, but of Wisconsin's future," Doyle, the commission chairman, said. "It's taken 20 years to get to this point, but we have a long way to go."

Immediately following the transfer signing, the authority met and voted 9-0 to enter into a 30-year lease with the State Building Commission, giving the local group management responsibilities over the system.

The authority will pay \$1 annually to lease the system and use a portion of the interest from \$11.8 million in federal funds presented to the state on Friday for operation of the locks.

The \$11.8 million check, presented by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, must be set aside to fund potential closure of locks, Van De Hey said, although closure is not envisioned.



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Van De Hey said the Corps pledged an additional \$5.5 million in federal matching funds to be used for actual restoration of the locks, beginning with four locks in Appleton. The state will also provide \$2.75 million for restoration work.

The state and federal funding requires a local match of \$2.75 million, of which \$1.4 million has been raised, Van De Hey said.

Van De Hey said the Appleton locks should be operational by 2008. Three locks are already operational, while the Rapide Croche lock near Wrightstown will remain sealed as a barrier to sea lamprey and other exotic species.

Leroy "Skip" Zacher of Oshkosh, a boating enthusiast who traveled through the locks 15 times before they were closed in the 1980s, said he looks forward to them reopening.

"It's a very historic and scenic trip," Zacher said of the section of waterway closed off with gates in which vessels in transit are raised or lowered by raising or lowering the water level of that section.

A delegation of state congressional leaders, headed by U.S. Rep. Tom Petri, R-Fond du Lac, who personally fought for more than two decades to preserve the locks, attended Friday's ceremonies.

"Many of us have fought to save the locks from the moment in the early 1980s when the Corps of Engineers started planning to shut them down," Petri said. "Nobody said it would be easy, but after 20 years of effort, we're finally restoring the locks to the stature they deserve as an historical treasure important to Wisconsin's quality of life, and with significant tourist potential."

A 140-mile stretch of the upper and lower Fox Rivers from Portage to Green Bay is eyed for development as the Fox River State Heritage Parkway, featuring cultural and historical attractions, parks and other significant open spaces along the river.

Appleton Mayor Tim Hanna said the transfer will provide a boost to economic development and tourism.

"This will open the river to more visitors from outside the area ... The river will become another gateway to Appleton," Hanna said. "On a regional basis, the Heritage Parkway will attract attention not only from people in Wisconsin, but from all over the country. This is something unique in the United States."

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